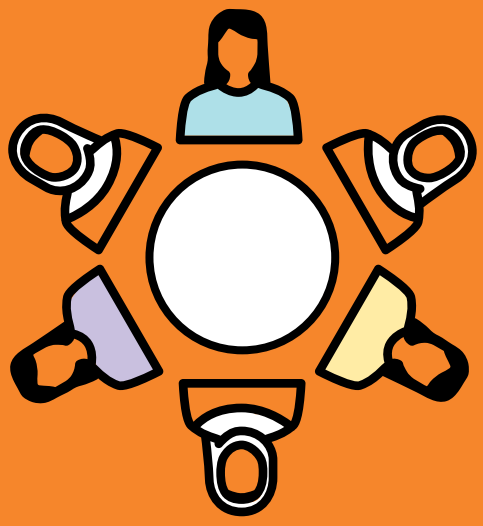
play to learn

Co-Designing Early Childhood Spaces in Humanitarian Contexts:

Insights from Play to Learn Practitioners



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THE PLAY TO LEARN PROJECT

Play to Learn is an innovative humanitarian program from Sesame Workshop, BRAC, and the International Rescue Committee that harnesses the power of play to deliver critical early learning to children and caregivers affected by the Rohingya and Syrian refugee crises. Made possible with the support of the LEGO Foundation, Play to Learn reaches families in their homes, health centers, and play spaces—providing them with the tools needed to foster nurturing care and help children learn and thrive. Partnering with NYU's Global TIES for Children as an independent evaluator, we are measuring the program's impact on children's development and caregivers' mental health and well-being. By generating tested, scalable, and transportable approaches and educational content, Play to Learn is laying the foundation for transformational change—allowing us to reach generations of children affected by crisis, no matter where they are.

THIS RESOURCE

This resource was created to help curate and synthesize the expertise and insight from practitioners in early childhood development who worked with children and families affected by conflict and crisis under the Play to Learn project from 2018-2024. This resource was developed by Childhood Education International under a consulting agreement with the Play to Learn Project in consultation with Play to Learn partners. This collaborative effort underscores the power of co-creation in addressing the complex challenges of education in emergencies and advancing meaningful change.

TThe full collection of program resources can be found at the Play to Learn Resource Hub (https://sesameworkshop.org/our-work/impact-areas/play-to-learn-resource-hub/).

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SESAME WORKSHOP

brac

INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

The LEGO Foundation

Community involvement in the design of early childhood education spaces ensures that they are child-friendly, use relevant local materials and cultural elements, and take into consideration local environmental conditions. Co-designed early childhood spaces for play-based learning should be responsive to children's unique needs, including age, physical disabilities, and activities envisioned. Play to Learn used the following questions to guide co-design processes across the Middle East and in Bangladesh to create safe, inclusive, and fun learning spaces for young children and their families.

Understanding the context

Play to Learn designed early childhood spaces to be responsive to the specific physical and human environment in each context in which we worked. Local communities have an important role to play in developing child-friendly spaces—advising early childhood development (ECD) service providers on local issues including ownership, climate, and community relationships.

- How do children currently use spaces for play in your context? What can we do to capitalize on these existing practices?

  Click here to read about how Play to Learn researched what play looks for children in the Rohingya camps to inform research and programs.

- What are the annual or cyclical weather conditions? How can we account for risks associated with these conditions (like extreme temperatures, heavy rains, or floods) in our space?

  Consider: Optimal indoor conditions like natural lighting, cooler temperature, good ventilation, and soothing colors can provide a sense of calm and well-being.

  Consider*:* Are there other natural disaster risks like earthquakes that should influence the physical space?

- Will this space have both indoor and outdoor elements? How will that affect the design?

  Consider*:* Flexibility and openness of the space to promote free movement and exploration for playful learning.

- What government agencies or community leaders hold authority over our location and how can we ensure their long-term buy-in for our space?

Constructing and maintaining the space

- What sustainable materials can be used to build structures? What local construction techniques might work best for building the space?

  Consider: Incorporating local building materials and techniques not only makes the construction process more cost-effective but also ensures that maintenance can be easily done by the local community.

- Who in the community may want to offer skills to support the space?

  Consider: Community members can offer their skills or expertise in construction, maintenance, design, art, or weather-proofing.

- How often will your planned indoor and outdoor spaces require maintenance? What is the plan to manage this ongoing work?

Safety in culturally-sensitive design

Though safety standards and the development of safe environments are culturally-informed and vary widely across contexts, there are some basic considerations that should always be taken into account when designing programming for young children and adults. Reviewing safety considerations together with the local community as part of a co-design process will ensure that service providers apply the community's valuable insights to the final design.

- How many children or adults will attend the space on a regular basis?

  Consider: Local regulations around space capacity, typical class sizes in the community, and child/adult ratios.

- What is the age range of the children expected to use the space?

  Consider: Very young children or infants (ages 0-3) will need different safety measures than preschool-age children. Local regulations may also vary by age.

- How close is the space to hazards, including noise or air pollution, construction or waste management sites, water sources, or other local risks? How can you mitigate or eliminate these risks?

  Example: Consider drowning prevention awareness for staff if your space is near water, even shallow sources of water.

- How will children move to and from the location? What are the changes needed to ensure safe routes for all children?

  Consider: Risks may vary for children by age, ability, and gender.

- Where are the nearest clean water and sanitation facilities, including toilets accessible to all? What additional facilities might be needed considering your expected attendance?

  Consider: Access may vary for children and adults by age, ability, and gender.

Local design elements

Collaborating with local communities on the visible and usable components of the space allows for joint ownership over its use and ensures it is responsive to community needs. This in turn improves relevance, accessibility, and usability of the physical space. Play to Learn incorporated community preferences about aesthetics and physical aspects of the early learning environments into all of our physical locations.

- Would your space benefit from areas designated for specific activities, multi-purpose areas, or a combination of both?
- What size and shape of furniture would work best for your target age group?

  Consider:
  - Local furniture designs that use sustainable material.
  - Movable and adjustable furniture pieces that can serve more than one function.
  - Height and size of furniture should be designed to promote children's autonomy.

- What storage solutions are available in your space for digital hardware like tablets or projectors as well as resources like print content, art supplies, or play materials?

  Consider:
  - How frequently children will use items.
  - How facilitators will engage children in picking up and storing materials.
  - How the weather could degrade the materials.

- What kind of play materials are needed?

  Play to Learn partners designed and developed play materials with community members across all countries.

- What colors or cultural symbols should be used for decoration? What preferences or ideas does the community have for the decoration of walls, doors, floors, or the outdoor environment?
- What sources of power can you install in your space? What sources of internet can you install in your space? How will you maintain that power and/or internet access?

  Consider: Community leadership may be able to help with advocating for the expansion of power or internet access.

SPOTLIGHT:

Co-design of BRAC's Humanitarian Play Labs with Rohingya community members

Humanitarian Play Labs provide play-based, culturally relevant early learning to Rohingya children ages 3-6 in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. BRAC co-designed the physical Humanitarian Play Lab spaces with Rohingya community members to ensure they are cost-effective, compliant with regulations, resistant to climate shocks, and culturally relevant. BRAC's Humanitarian Play Labs build upon their original Play Lab program used throughout rural areas in Bangladesh.

CULTURALLY RELEVANT DESIGN

- During early design of the Humanitarian Play Labs, BRAC consulted with Rohingya communities about colors and motifs and walked through the camp to see elements that families use to decorate their homes.
- One common decoration used by the Rohingya community is *shammy anas*, a kind of blanket hung above sleeping or seating areas to control temperature, reduce dust, and provide color to the room. BRAC invited young women and community mothers to design *shammy anas* for the Play Labs.
- Another design element that is particular and distinctive to the Rohingya is the use of floral and vine motifs, and the use of bright colors. BRAC invited children to draw murals on the doors and walls of the centers, which also provided a therapeutic activity for children.

A HUMANITARIAN PLAY LAB FEATURING STRUCTURAL AND ARTISTIC ELEMENTS CREATED BY ROHINGYA MOTHERS AND CHILDREN

ROHINGYA CAMP REGULATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

- Space limitations within the crowded camps meant that the interiors of the structures had to be very flexible to allow children to move and play. The shelves and furnishing in the original Play Lab design were removed to create one central space for all activities. Without the additional space of a yard or garden, Rohingya children were able to adapt their physical play to the inside of the structure.
- Because of regulations around permanent structures, Humanitarian Play Labs are made with bamboo and thatched roofs.

CLIMATE AND CONSTRUCTION IN THE CAMPS

- Cox's Bazar has very high temperatures at some times of the year (over 40° Celsius/ 104° Fahrenheit). For this reason, the Humanitarian Play Labs were designed with a slit window running around the top of the structure allowing for cross-ventilation and with roofing to provide shade from the heat. These natural cooling methods are especially necessary considering there is no electricity in the camps.
- Colorful plastic mats are used to cover the dirt floors and keep the Humanitarian Play Labs clean.
- As there is no electricity for power tools, BRAC invited bamboo artisans who used traditional techniques to build the Humanitarian Play Lab structures in the camps.

STORAGE

- Free play materials are kept in steel trunks to preserve and protect them from damage.
- Teachers use bamboo baskets and plastic baskets for storage.
- Large storybooks are hung on simple wooden racks, serving as both decoration and a functional bookshelf.

PHOTO: BRAC IED

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PLAY TO LEARN, PLEASE CONTACT:

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